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ABSTRACT

This summary reviews the rationale for defining English language arts standards for K-12 students and the perspective on language learning that informs them. After presenting 2 of the 12 standards and discussing them briefly, the summary provides a vignette to illustrate how the standards might be manifested in a classroom setting. (RS)

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STANDARDS for the ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

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PROFESSIONAL SUMMARY

STANDARDS FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Language is the most powerful, most readily available tool we have for representing the world to ourselves and ourselves to the world. Language is not only a means of communication, it is a primary instrument of thought, a defining feature of culture, and an unmistakable mark of personal identity. Encouraging and enabling students to learn to use language effectively is certainly one of society's most important tasks.

—Standards for the English Language Arts, 1996

The ***Standards for the English Language Arts,*** prepared by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), define what our two organizations believe students should know about and be able to do with language as a result of their kindergarten through grade twelve schooling. The standards grow out of a national conversation about the goals and purposes of English language arts education. Our aim is to ensure that *all* students develop the literacy skills they need to succeed in school, in the workplace, and in the various domains of life.

This professional summary of the *Standards* reviews the rationale for defining these English language arts standards and the perspective on language learning that informs them. After presenting two of the standards and discussing them briefly, we provide a vignette to illustrate how the standards might be manifested in a classroom setting.

The standards and vignettes are not meant to prescribe instructional approaches. Instead, we hope that teachers and administrators will translate the standards for themselves, responding to the particular needs of their students and communities, and that our work will serve as a starting point for ongoing discussions about English language arts curricula and classroom activities. Thus, the English language arts standards represent not an end but a beginning—a starting point for discussion and action within states, districts, and individual schools across the country.

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THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS: A SELECTION

The complete set of twelve standards is presented and elaborated in the full document. While we wish to emphasize the complex interrelationships among the standards, and the importance of viewing them as a whole, we have listed them separately in order to facilitate and focus discussion. Let us briefly examine two of the standards here.

Students become knowledgeable and strategic readers by studying a broad range of texts. Through extensive reading, they learn which approaches to use to comprehend, interpret, and evaluate the various texts they encounter.

Flexibility in applying different reading strategies is of the greatest importance: students need to know how to vary their approaches according to the nature of the text, the purpose of the reading, and their own knowledge and experience. Through practice and experience, students learn to adapt the tactics they are using if they sense that things are not going well or if they move from one genre or context to another.

Students need frequent opportunities to write about different topics and for different audiences and purposes. These opportunities enable students to understand the varying demands of different kinds of writing tasks and to recognize how to adapt tone, style, and content to the particular task at hand. They need guidance and practice to develop their competencies in academic writing, whether they are responding to literary works or writing for other school subjects.

As writers hear how different readers interpret and evaluate their work, they learn how to use constructive criticism to revise or recast their writing. This process helps students to internalize a sense of what their readers need and expect. It also extends the body of knowledge that they bring to future writing tasks, giving them greater confidence and versatility as writers.

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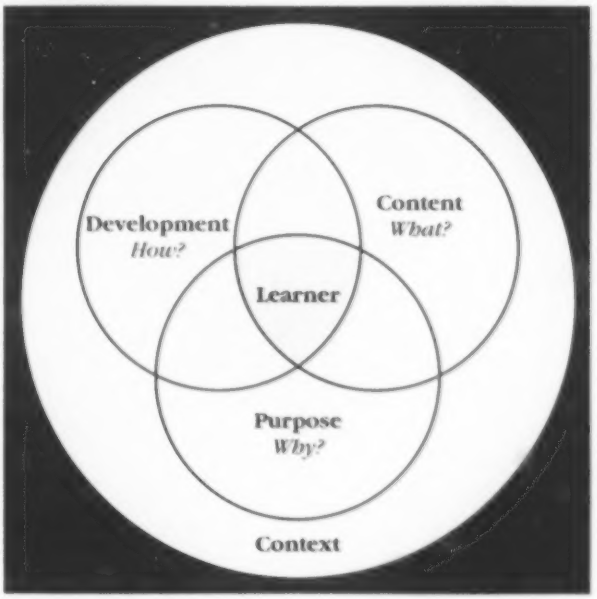
THE PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE LEARNING INFORMING THE STANDARDS

The perspective that informs the English language arts standards, presented in the figure below, places the learner at the core. Because the standards are learner-centered, they focus on the ways in which students actively participate in their learning, acquire knowledge, shape experience, and respond to their own particular needs and goals through the English language arts.

The three circles at the heart of the model represent three dimensions of language learning: content, purpose, and development. The *content* dimension elaborates what students should know and be able to do with the English language arts. This includes knowledge of spoken, visual, and written texts and of the processes involved in creating, interpreting, and critiquing such texts. The *purpose* dimension articulates why students use the language arts—that is, the ends to which we direct our literacy practices. And the *development* dimension focuses on how students grow as language users. Surrounding these circles is a larger circle labeled "context." Because all language learning takes place in, shapes, and is in turn shaped by particular social and cultural contexts, this dimension encompasses the standards as a whole.

The intersections of the content, purpose, and development circles in the figure reflect the profound interrelations of *what*, *why*, and *how* in English language arts learning. Although the standards concentrate primarily on the content dimension, the other dimensions are always present. To put it differently, within each standard, content issues—such as the appropriate range and depth of reading materials—are closely linked to purpose and developmental processes.



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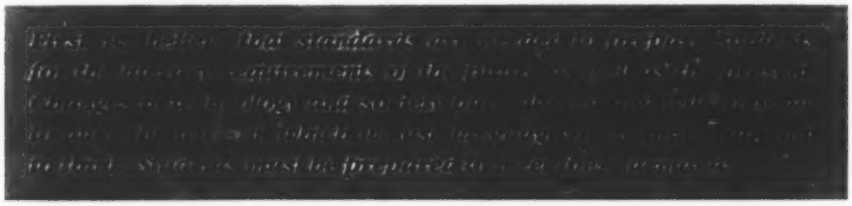
HISTORY

The development of these standards began in the summer of 1992, when IRA, NCTE, and the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois initiated the Standards Project for the English Language Arts (SPELA). From the fall of that year until the spring of 1994, SPELA task forces representing early, middle, and high school educators worked to develop frameworks and standards, supported by funding from the U.S. Department of Education. When federal funding ended, IRA and NCTE continued the project, composing drafts of the standards and circulating them to thousands of reviewers. The standards document is the outcome of that consensus process.

WHY STANDARDS ARE NEEDED

Over the past several years, national educational organizations have launched a series of ambitious projects to define voluntary standards for science, mathematics, art, music, foreign languages, social studies, English language arts, and other subjects. We believe that the act of defining such standards is worthwhile because it invites further reflection and conversation about the fundamental goals of public schooling. In articulating content standards for the English language arts, then, we are motivated by three core beliefs:



Literacy expectations have risen over time and are likely to continue to accelerate in the coming decades. To participate fully in society and the workplace in the year 2020, citizens will need powerful literacy abilities that until now have been achieved by only a small percentage of the population. At the same time, individuals will need to develop technological competencies undreamed of as recently as ten years ago.

Accordingly, being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users of print and spoken language as well as the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, photography, and more. It also means being able to use an array of technologies to gather

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information and communicate with others. Based on this expanded definition of literacy, the English language arts standards address not only reading and writing, but also speaking, listening, viewing, and visually representing. The standards also acknowledge technology's important role in each of these areas.

Varying curricular and instructional approaches are being used in English language arts classrooms across the country, yet beneath this diversity of approaches there is remarkable consensus. Teachers share the belief that students should develop competencies in the English language arts that will prepare them for the diverse literacy demands that will face them throughout their lives. Teachers also agree that the English language arts are important not only as subjects in and of themselves, but also as supporting skills for students' learning in all other subjects. Finally, teachers believe that students can best develop language competencies (like other competencies) through meaningful activities and settings.

This vision of English language arts education, embodied in the standards, must be shared by all those who have a stake in the future of our schools—not just teachers, but also school administrators, policymakers, parents, and members of the general public.

To prepare all students to become literate citizens, we must hold high expectations for every student and every school. All students in this country can achieve the standards set forth in this document, and we believe that it is the responsibility not only of schools and teachers but also of policymakers, parents, and communities to ensure that this occurs.

At the same time, standards, by themselves, cannot erase the impact of poverty, ethnic or cultural discrimination, low levels of family literacy, and social and political disenfranchisement. We must therefore ensure that all students have equal opportunities to learn, that inequities in school resources are addressed, that schools have an adequate number of knowledgeable teachers, and that we provide safe and supportive environments for learning.

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STANDARDS IN THE CLASSROOM

Imagine a classroom in which all of the standards are realized. This kind of classroom, idealized as it may sound, does exist. In many schools across the country, students are engaged in challenging, purposeful language experiences that enable them to develop the competencies represented in the English language arts standards. The full document presents eighteen vignettes depicting such classrooms. The following selection shows a middle school class engaged in analyzing a short story. The questions at the end of the vignette offer starting points for discussion.

A Middle School Vignette

A class of eighth-grade students learns about characterization in fiction through reading Toni Cade Bambara's "Raymond's Run," a short story in which a young female protagonist comes to understand that competition and compassion cannot always coexist peacefully. The students begin by predicting the possible content of the story, based on the title, and they record these predictions (and their reasons for them) in their journals. The students listen to their teacher read the story aloud; then they read through selected passages themselves in small groups, stopping often to discuss their ideas or to write in their journals.

After everyone has read the story, the teacher directs the students to write brief impressions of the story's protagonist, Squeaky, in their journals. The classmates exchange entries and discuss what they have written, sharing their first impressions of the character. The class works as a whole to generate and discuss responses to questions their teacher has written, referring often to the text of the story to support various responses.

Following this discussion, the teacher asks students to draw Squeaky as they visualize her, based on key passages they have chosen from the story. Then they make notes around their drawings, completing sentence starters provided by their teacher: "Squeaky likes . . . , Squeaky dislikes . . . , Squeaky sees the world . . . , Squeaky learns . . . ." They write the completed sentences around their drawings, like captions, and display their work for the class. After viewing one another's work and talking about what they have written, students write a more formal paper analyzing their responses to Squeaky's development as a character.

➤ What could be done in this example to expand students' literary experiences, based on their interest in the story? How might the theme of competition/winning be extended to other works or other kinds of projects?

➤ In this vignette the teacher selected the story and guided the students toward specific questions through cues and prompts. How might this be balanced with student-selected readings and student-guided activities?

➤ How does the focused approach to instruction—in which the teacher directs students' attention to a specific topic, such as character development—fit with instructional approaches that focus on students' own responses to and questions about what they are reading?

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The English language arts standards were reviewed by thousands of educators over a three-year period. Here is a sampling of their comments on recent drafts:

I think the overall organization of the document is clear and readable by classroom teachers. . . . The standards themselves are also very clearly defined and the language and tone of the document are very accessible.

—**Cora Lee Five**, Elementary School Teacher, Edgewood School, Scarsdale, New York

[T]he state coordinators of English language arts applaud the form and substance of the standards document. . . . We are anxiously awaiting the official NCTE/IRA English Language Arts Standards so that we can use them in our own standards-setting and curriculum projects.

—**Jan Hahn**, Curriculum and Assessment Specialist, Office of Public Instruction, Helena, Montana; Chair, Assembly of State Coordinators of English Language Arts

One might think a document like this would be stuffy in tone and inaccessible because of jargon. However, this document seems written to an actual audience of real people, and I admire the clarity it has achieved.

—**Christina Murphy**, Director, William L. Adams Writing Center, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth

I think the overall organization of this standards document will allow English and language arts teachers to use the standards to help their students improve their reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking skills. . . .

—**Pat Salerno**, English/Language Arts Supervisor, 7–12, Omaha Public Schools, Omaha, Nebraska

The singular effect of this document is that it is user friendly. I find it theoretical as well as practical. . . . I also see that this document meets the need of non-educators. It is a clear statement to the public about the vision for the language arts.

—**Kathleen Edlund**, Curriculum, Instruction, and School Support; Tacoma Public Schools, Tacoma, Washington

We applaud the courageous and gargantuan efforts of the NCTE and the IRA in the development and distribution of rigorous academic standards for English language arts and reading. The October 1995 draft is most promising and absolutely gets to the heart of what our students deserve and must know and be able to do in the English language arts.

—**Sharon O'Neal**, Director of English Language Arts & Reading, Texas Education Agency; Joe Rubin, Shirley Wright, Co-Chairs, QuEST Project

As our department met to discuss this draft, we also tried to evaluate ourselves according to the standards as outlined. . . . I wish all schools could catch the vision.

—**Janis Warr**, English Department Chair, Logan High School, Logan, Utah

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